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Contact: Bonnie Holmes-Stevens
928/527-3344

Anniversary of Mount Elden Fire Serves as Reminder of Catastrophic Fire's Long-term Impacts

(Flagstaff, Ariz.) As the 25th anniversary of Mount Elden's Radio Fire approaches, researchers, land managers and firefighters are reminding those who live in forest communities how catastrophic fire can change the landscape and threaten homes, and how the need for forest restoration is urgent.

Researchers say the ponderosa pine forest that once covered Mount Elden won't be growing back any time soon because the shallow, thin soils that existed on top of the bedrock took thousands of years to develop and will take that long to come back.

"After a fire of that intensity and the erosion that follows, you're almost going back to a primary succession state, like you'd have after a volcanic eruption or a landslide, where you've lost the biological legacy," says Rocky Mountain Research Station Soil Scientist Steve Overby.

A teenager's campfire on June 17, 1977 was the source of the blaze that scorched 4,594 acres. The event, that forever changed Flagstaff's backdrop, occurred on a hot, breezy summer day following one of the driest winters on record.

This June, dry forest conditions are even more severe than they were in 1977 and large fires are raging across the parched Southwest.

"Never has a drought coincided with the fuel buildup we have in the forests today," says Ecological Restoration Institute Director Wally Covington, Ph.D. "The fires we're seeing are burning in areas of overly dense forest vegetation due to 120 years of fire exclusion. The damage could have been prevented if ecological restoration treatments had been implemented. This is a fire season that's stacking up to be the worst ever."

Currently, restoration projects are underway in the Southwest as lawmakers, researchers, land management agencies and citizens work toward tackling the daunting task of restoring forest ecosystems and reducing the massive fuel load.

For more information about restoration projects and a look back at the Radio Fire, a new publication, *Living with Fire: 25 Years after the Mount Elden Burn*, is available at the ERI at Northern Arizona University, at Coconino National Forest offices and at Flagstaff Fire Stations.

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